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Reagan facing test on SALT II ruling

By Bill Gertz
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President Reagan faces a key decision Monday on continued compliance with the terms of the unratified SALT II treaty.

The options before him range from a complete scrapping of the treaty limits to a strict adherence to its terms, with both advocates and opponents of compliance advising that either choice risks national security.

Backers of compliance warn that the Soviets would outrace the United States in building up offensive nuclear arms if the SALT II restraints were removed.

Opponents, on the other hand, argue that the restraints only tie the hands of the United States while the Soviets build their nuclear machine at their own tempo regardless of SALT.

The debate over the issue reached new heights this week as friends and foes within the administration and on Capitol Hill grappled with this key national security issue.

The Senate Wednesday reached a compromise on an amendment to a defense authorization bill. The legislators modified the amendment — which would have committed the administration to continue a policy of "not undercutting" the treaty limits through 1986 — by permitting the United States to respond to Soviet violations through building a new type of intercontinental ballistic missile.

Last year's defense authorization bill requires the president to report to Congress on the administration's plans for continuing to abide by the 1979 treaty under what has been referred to as a "no undercut" policy. A week ago Mr. Reagan notified Congress that the report will be presented June 10.

On one side of the debate are arms control skeptics who see a growing nuclear imbalance leaving the United States less secure militarily. They foresee a Soviet strategic edge that would permit increased global adventurism.

Instances of Soviet noncompliance with arms agreements have provided arms control critics with

arguments that urge the United States to abandon what they consider an ambiguously worded and unratified treaty. It is, therefore, an agreement they see as permitting large increases in weapons. They favor a more clearly defined process aimed at reducing nuclear arms.

Arms control advocates counter those arguments saying, in effect, "some limits are better than no limits". They question the seriousness of Soviet violations as technicalities. These, they feel, should not be used as pretexts for abandoning the only process that could provide a common ground for managing super-power weapons.

Since the Senate never ratified SALT II, the question of continued compliance and Soviet noncompliance is complicated. Both sides agreed in 1981 to observe the treaty limits through programs that do not undercut the provisions.

Treaty opponents argue that the administration's commitment to follow SALT II guidelines violates the Senate's authority to ratify treaties. Proponents counter that Soviet treaty violations — the basis for opposition to continuing the no undercut policy — can not be considered violations if the treaty was never in force.

New Soviet weapons deployments are the main factor in the argument against further compliance. The administration, backed by conservatives, has produced several reports that detail Soviet noncompliance with arms control agreements. Besides unrelated Soviet arms control violations, the admin-

istration found six instances where Soviets actions exceeded SALT II provisions, only two of which are broadly agreed to be significant.

They are the Soviet deployment of the SS-25 intercontinental ballistic missile in violation of the SALT II prohibition against more than one new type of missile and the coding of missile test data called telemetry encryption. Other suggested infractions are the production of Backfire bombers beyond the Brezhnev promise of 30 per year, violation of the "heavy" missile limit on throw-

weight for the SS-NX 23, deployment of the SS-16 ICBM at the Soviet test site at Plesetsk, and the failure to build down to the agreed level of 2,250 nuclear launchers.

The Soviets have "probably" violated SALT II restrictions on the Backfire bomber by basing squadrons within striking range of the United States and by providing the Backfire with a refueling capability, the administration has charged.

Sen. James McClure, R-Idaho, a leading critic of administration strategic arms policy, believes Soviet violations are serious enough that the United States should end what he considers unilateral compliance.

"It is a fact that the Soviets are over every one of the six ceilings of SALT II, except one, and the Soviets will probably go over this ceiling in 1986," the senator said.

Within the administration, Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger and CIA Director William Casey have been among the leaders trying to persuade the president to jettison the no undercut policy. A key Pentagon official on this side is Richard Perle, assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs.

Mr. Perle's statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee last year sums up the opposition view: "Arms control without Soviet compliance is nothing more than an exercise in unilateral disarmament."

In testimony before the committee he charged that the ambiguities in SALT II leave room for circumvention "without a legally provable instance of violation," he said.

A senior administration official, speaking on background, called the no undercut policy "a contingent policy" where United States adherence is contingent upon Soviet adherence.

"And they have not adhered," the official said.

The official dismissed the threat of a massive Soviet weapons increase as a result a SALT II breakout as "pure fiction."

He said that the most compelling reason not to continue SALT II is the effect of president's decision on Moscow. If the president, who is on record as opposed to the treaty, changes his mind and agrees to continue its limits, it would be interpreted by the Soviets as "a sign of weakness."

Administration officials on the pro-SALT II side are Secretary of State George P. Shultz and National Security adviser Robert McFarlane who argue against abandoning the

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SALT limits since it would ultimately be against U.S. national security interests.

They and their supporters argue that a decision to ignore the current policy of not undercutting SALT II would provide the Soviets with a propaganda windfall with which to incite various European publics and place new strains on the NATO alliance.

At issue in the debate are numbers on SALT II ceilings for nuclear weapons. The administration will be faced with its first challenge to the limits in September when sea trials begin for a new Trident-class submarine, the USS Alaska. Testing the Alaska will place the United States

in violation of the SALT limit on the number of submarine missile launchers unless a Poseidon submarine is deactivated so that Soviet spy satellites can detect that its missiles tubes are empty.

Paul Warnke, one of the SALT II negotiators, believes that the United States has more to gain from sticking to the agreement than by breaking out of the treaty levels. In an interview, he compared the two sides' capability to go beyond the SALT II levels and said the Soviet Union could triple the number of warheads in its arsenal.

"The Soviet Union could go from about 9,800 strategic warheads today to 28,000 within ten years," Mr. Warnke said.

The rapid Soviet buildup without SALT II, he said, would defeat U.S. verification efforts.

"As a consequence there would be a growing Soviet nuclear threat and we wouldn't even know how big it was," Mr. Warnke said.

Raymond Garthoff, a former SALT negotiator now with the Brookings Institution, also believes the United States will be better off under continued SALT II constraints because of the Soviet capability to rapidly build up its forces.

Mr. Garthoff said the United States should respond to Soviet violations by matching them with U.S. programs. For example, the Soviet deployment of the SS-X-25 should be matched with a U.S. decision to deploy the mobile, single warhead Midgetman.